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ABSTRACT

Several current educational practices have narrowed the kindergarten and primary grade curriculum, constricted equal educational opportunity, and curtailed the exercise of professional responsibility of early childhood educators. In response to these trends, the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education has developed the following six principles to guide kindergarten entry and placement: (1) Kindergarten teachers and administrators guard the integrity of developmentally appropriate programs for young children by resisting pressure for acceleration of narrowly focused, skills-based curricula. (2) Children are enrolled in kindergarten based on their legal right to enter. Families are not counseled to delay children's entrance. (3) Kindergarten teachers and administrators are informed about measurement techniques and are involved responsibly in their use; they do not defer measurement decisions solely to psychometricians and test publishers. (4) Retention is rejected as a viable option. (5) Any tests used at kindergarten entrance are valid, reliable, and helpful in initial program planning and information-sharing with parents; they are not used to create barriers or to sort children. (6) All children are welcomed as they are into heterogeneous kindergarten settings. Concluding discussion argues that practitioners cannot uphold practices and programs predicated on failure. (RH)

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National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

1987

Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement

a position statement

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Table of Contents

Introduction v
Overview of Position Statement 1
Summary of Principles 3
Discussion of Principles
- Principle #1 4
- Principle #2 5
- Principle #3 6
- Principle #4 7
- Principle #5 8
- Principle #6 10

Call for Action 11
References 12

Introduction

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) is a national organization of early childhood specialists who work in state education agencies. The goals of the organization are:

- to enhance the efforts of the State Departments of Education on behalf of young children;
- to strengthen communication and coordination among states;
- to influence and support policies and legislation that affect the education, health, and welfare of children and their families;
- to offer assistance and leadership in researching, analyzing, and recommending standards for quality early childhood and teacher preparation programs; and,
- to promote communication and coordination between State Departments of Education and other agencies and professional organizations serving young children.

Members of the association, who represent all sections of the country, have observed with concern the rise of several practices which narrow the curriculum in kindergarten and primary education, constrict equal educational opportunity for some children, and curtail the exercise of professional responsibility of some early childhood educators.

This position statement on entry and placement in kindergarten reflects those concerns. It is based upon current research as well as the experiences and expertise of NAECS/SDE members. NAECS/SDE offers this position paper in an effort to increase public awareness about educational policies and practices affecting young children. Our hope is that it will serve as a catalyst for change at local, state, and national levels.

Overview of Position Statement

Over the past several years members of NAECS/SDE have become increasingly alarmed at emerging attitudes and practices which erode children's legal rights to enter public school and participate in a beneficial educational program. Dramatic changes in what children are expected to do in kindergarten are resulting in well-intentioned interventions which are often inequitable, ineffective, and wasteful of limited public resources.

Many classroom teachers report that they have little or no part in decisions which determine curriculum and instructional methodology. Instead, those decisions are made by administrators, influenced by public demand for more stringent educational standards and the ready availability of commercial, standardized tests.

Additional pressure on kindergarten programs sometimes comes from primary teachers, who themselves face requirements for more effective instruction and higher pupil achievement. They argue that the kindergarten program should do more. In addition, a growing number of states and localities are raising the age of kindergarten eligibility, providing further evidence of changed expectations for kindergarten education and kindergarten children.

A number of highly questionable practices have resulted from the trend to demand more of kindergarten children. These practices include: 1) inappropriate uses of screening and readiness tests; 2) denial or discouragement of entrance for eligible children; 3) the development of segregated transitional classes for children deemed unready for the next traditional level of school; and 4) an increasing use of retention.

Two predominant considerations underlie these practices. The first is a drive to achieve homogeneity in instructional groupings. Some educators believe that instruction will be easier and more effective if the variability within the class is reduced. There is, however, no compelling evidence that children learn more or better in homogeneous groupings. In fact, most of them learn more efficiently and achieve more satisfactory social/emotional development in mixed-ability groups.

The second is a well-intentioned effort to protect children from inappropriately high demands on their intellectual and affective abilities. When parents are counseled to delay a child's entry or when children are placed in "developmental" or "readiness" classes to prepare for kindergarten or "transitional" classes to prepare for first grade, it is often because the school program is perceived to be too difficult for those children. In this view, children must be made ready for the program, in contrast to tailoring the program to the strengths and needs of the children.

Delaying children's entry into school and/or segregating them into extra-year classes actually label children as failures at the outset of their school experience. These practices are simply subtle forms of retention. Not only is there a preponderance of evidence that there is no academic benefit from retention in its many forms, but there also appear to be threats to the social-emotional development of the child subjected to such practices. The educational community can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of policies and practices which: 1) assign the burden of responsibility to the child, rather than the program; 2) place the child at risk of failure, apathy toward school, and demoralization; and 3) fail to contribute to quality early childhood education.

Therefore, NAECS/SDE calls for policymakers, educators, and all concerned about young children to use the summary principles and discussions which follow for kindergarten entry and placement:

Summary of Principles for Kindergarten Entry and Placement

by National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

1 KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS GUARD THE INTEGRITY OF EFFECTIVE, DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN . . .

. . . THEY DO NOT YIELD TO PRESSURE FOR ACCELERATION OF NARROWLY FOCUSED SKILL-BASED CURRICULA.

2 CHILDREN ARE ENROLLED IN KINDERGARTEN BASED ON THEIR LEGAL RIGHT TO ENTER . . .

. . . FAMILIES ARE NOT COUNSELED OR PRESSURED TO DELAY ENTRANCE OF THEIR CHILDREN FOR A YEAR BY KEEPING THEM AT HOME OR ENROLLING THEM IN PRESCHOOL.

3 KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE INFORMED ABOUT MEASUREMENT STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES AND ARE INVOLVED RESPONSIBLY IN THEIR USE . . .

. . . THEY DO NOT DEFER MEASUREMENT DECISIONS SOLELY TO PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND TEST PUBLISHERS.

4 RETENTION IS REJECTED AS A VIABLE OPTION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN . . .

. . . IT IS NOT PERPETUATED ON THE BASIS OF FALSE ASSUMPTIONS AS TO ITS EDUCATIONAL BENEFIT.

5 ANY TESTS USED AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE ARE VALID, RELIABLE, AND HELPFUL IN INITIAL PROGRAM PLANNING AND INFORMATION-SHARING WITH PARENTS . . .

. . . THEY ARE NOT USED TO CREATE BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ENTRY OR TO SORT CHILDREN INTO WHAT ARE PERCEIVED TO BE HOMOGENEOUS GROUPS.

6 ALL CHILDREN ARE WELCOMED — AS THEY ARE — INTO HETEROGENEOUS KINDERGARTEN SETTINGS . . .

. . . THEY ARE NOT SEGREGATED INTO EXTRA-YEAR PROGRAMS PRIOR TO OR FOLLOWING REGULAR KINDERGARTEN.

Discussion of Principle 1

- **KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS GUARD THE INTEGRITY OF EFFECTIVE, DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN . . .**

  . . . THEY DO NOT YIELD TO PRESSURE FOR ACCELERATION OF NARROWLY FOCUSED SKILL-BASED CURRICULA.

Most of the questionable entry and placement practices that have emerged in recent years have their genesis in concerns over children's capacities to cope with an increasingly inappropriate curriculum in the kindergarten. External pressures in recent decades have so changed the focus of the curriculum in kindergarten that it is often difficult to distinguish between curriculum and methodology in classrooms for young children and those of later elementary grades.

Several factors have interacted to bring about those changes. Research about the capabilities of young children has been misrepresented and misunderstood. A popular belief has developed that children are smarter now primarily because of exposure to television and because so many go to preschool. A rather large number of overzealous parents have also contributed to the problem by insisting that their children be "taught" more and expecting children to learn to read in kindergarten. This parental view of kindergarten has reinforced the notion that didactic methods of teaching, many of questionable value even for older elementary children, should be accepted practice in kindergarten.

Too often teachers are told, or they believe, that it is not enough to set the stage for learning by preparing a rich and varied environment and encouraging children to engage in activities which carry their development forward. In too many kindergartens, rich creative experiences with real materials which formerly provided the core of kindergarten have now been replaced with abstract curriculum materials requiring pencil-and-paper responses. Often these are routinely tied to tightly sequenced and often inappropriate grade-level lists of expectations for skill acquisitions in each of the subject areas. Ironically, children who are ready to learn to read are more likely to advance as far as they are able in an active learning classroom.

(Bredekamp, 1987; Elkind, 1986; Nebraska State Board of Education, 1984; Goodlad and Anderson, 1987; Goodman, 1986; Hills, 1987a; Katz, et al., 1987; Kamii, 1982; Shipman, 1986; Spodek; 1986)

Discussion of Principle 2

- **CHILDREN ARE ENROLLED IN KINDERGARTEN BASED ON THEIR LEGAL RIGHT TO ENTER . . .**

  . . . FAMILIES ARE NOT COUNSELED OR PRESSURED TO DELAY ENTRANCE OF THEIR CHILDREN FOR A YEAR BY KEEPING THEM AT HOME OR ENROLLING THEM IN PRESCHOOL.

Serious negative consequences attend the rising trend to discourage some parents from enrolling their age-eligible children in kindergarten. The dilemma is that the very children being counseled out of school are the ones who, if provided a flexible appropriate kindergarten curriculum, could benefit the most. The "gift of time" that many parents have been persuaded to give children by delaying school entry can result instead in denying them opportunities for cognitive growth through social interaction with their age-mates. It also implies that children can fail at school even before they begin.

Public schools cannot ethically select some children who are eligible under the law and reject others. Children subjected to delayed entry disproportionately represent racial and linguistic minorities, low income children, and males. Denial of entrance to school, blatant or subtle, increases the disparity between social classes and could be construed as a denial of a child's civil rights. It also creates an equity problem since it places the financial burden for alternative schooling on parents.

Curiously, states with quite different entry cutoff dates perceive that the same problems exist. While there is some evidence that older children tend to do better initially, the differences due to age are small and disappear with time. The specific entry date is irrelevant and recent legislative action in several states to raise the entry age will not accomplish what is intended. The quality and appropriateness of the kindergarten curriculum should be the focus of the reform. Age is the only non-discriminatory entry criterion.

No matter where the kindergarten entry date is set, there will always be a younger group of children within a given classroom.

It is both unfair and unreasonable to establish expectations for achievement on what the oldest children can do. Delaying entry has been shown to contribute to greater variation among children in the same class—in chronological age, size, motor ability, experiential backgrounds, and other learning characteristics.

While educators should be sensitive to and respectful of the wishes of some parents to postpone their children's initiation into the larger world of school, school personnel also have the responsibility to assure that parents do not make this decision based on anxiety over the suitability of the kindergarten program for their child.

(Bredekamp, 1987; Katz, 1987; Nebraska State Board of Education, 1984; Shipman, 1987; Shepard and Smith, 1985; Smith and Shepard, 1987)

Discussion of Principle 3

- KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE INFORMED ABOUT MEASUREMENT STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES AND ARE INVOLVED RESPONSIBLY IN THEIR USE . . .

  . . . THEY DO NOT DEFER MEASUREMENT DECISIONS SOLELY TO PSYCHOMETRICIANS AND TEST PUBLISHERS.

Measurement is a process of determining whether particular characteristics are present in an individual or a program and the amount or extent of them. Standardized tests are one form of measurement. Measurement can also be accomplished through teacher observation, checklists, and questionnaires.

Because testing is so prevalent, many teachers are faced with challenges for which their training and experience have left them unprepared. Today's early childhood educators must be able to: 1) recommend appropriate measures to be used in the beginning of school years; 2) interpret and use the information which the measures produce; 3) communicate to other educators and parents what test information means about student progress; and 4) prevent and/or correct misuses of testing.

To fulfill these responsibilities requires that early childhood educators become informed about the functions of tests and measures, their properties, and the legitimate uses of test data. Tests which fit one purpose adequately may be totally unsuited to another. Most importantly, early educators must know about the various forms of assessment which can supplement or replace test scores.

As tests have increased in popularity, instances of their abuse have increased. Abuses occur when:

* Tests are used for purposes for which they were not designed (e.g., screening tests used to diagnose a child's development);
* Tests do not meet acceptable levels of quality (e.g., no reliability or validity studies are available);
* A test is used as the sole basis for a decision about placing a child in a specific educational program;
* A test or tests determine curricular objectives; and
* Teachers lack sufficient training and experience in the use of tests.

(Bredekamp, 1987; Hills, 1987b; Meisels, 1987; NAEYC, 1986; Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, 1985)

Discussion of Principle 4

- RETENTION IS REJECTED AS A VIABLE OPTION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN . . .

  . . . IT IS NOT PERPETUATED ON THE BASIS OF FALSE ASSUMPTIONS AS TO ITS EDUCATIONAL BENEFIT.

The practice of retention as a means of reducing school failure is controversial among educators. Although research does not support the practice, many educators do. While it is true that teachers do see children they have retained making progress, it is also true that they have no opportunity to see how well the children might have progressed had they been promoted.

Control-group studies which are structured to measure this comparison come down clearly on the side of promotion. Students recommended for retention but advanced to the next level end up doing as well as or better academically than non-promoted peers. Children who have been retained demonstrate more social regression, display more behavior problems, suffer stress in connection with being retained, and more frequently leave high school without graduating.

The evidence does not support the use of retention. The current methodology used in selecting students for retention makes it impossible to predict accurately who will benefit. Pro-retention policies as a strategy for establishing rigorous academic standards are likely to be self-defeating. The lowered expectations parents and teachers develop decrease the probability that retained children will attain their potential. Retention policies should be highly suspect given the lack of demonstrated effectiveness and prevalent bias against certain groups of children.

(Goodlad and Anderson, 1987; May and Welch, 1984; Norton, 1983; Plummer, et al., 1987; Shepard and Smith, 1985; Shepard and Smith, 1986; Smith and Shepard, 1987)

Discussion of Principle 5

- ANY TESTS USED AT KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE ARE VALID, RELIABLE, AND HELPFUL IN INITIAL PROGRAM PLANNING AND INFORMATION-SHARING WITH PARENTS . . .

  . . . THEY ARE NOT USED TO CREATE BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ENTRY OR TO SORT CHILDREN INTO WHAT ARE PERCEIVED TO BE HOMOGENOUS GROUPS.

Kindergarten tesing is a common practice in today's public schools. Unfortunately, screening and readiness tests are being used interchangeably to determine the educational fate of many young children before they enter kindergarten. Developmental screening tests broadly and briefly tap developmental domains and are designed primarily to predict future school success—to find children who, after further assessment, appear to be good candidates for selective programs. As such, they must contain predictive validity as well as the accepted standards for all tests of reliability, validity, sensitivity, and specificity. Screening procedures should include vision, hearing, and health assessments.

Readiness tests, by definition and statistical design, do not predict outcomes and therefore cannot be substituted for such purposes. These tests assist teachers in making instructional decisions about individual children. Children who do poorly on readiness tests are likely to benefit most from the kindergarten curriculum. The paradox is that if readiness tests are substituted for developmental screening measures, these children are being channeled away from the regular classroom.

A major problem with kindergarten tests is that, of the many available, relatively few meet acceptable standards of reliability and validity. The probability of a child being misplaced based on several widely used tests is fifty percent—the same odds as flipping a coin. The burden of proof is on educational and testing professions to justify the decisions they make in the selection or creation of screening instruments. Otherwise, educators are left speculating about what the results mean. Flawed results lead to flawed decisions and wasted tax dollars.

Even when credible, appropriate tests are selected, kindergarten screening and developmental assessment are still uncertain undertakings because:

* Normal behavior of young children is highly variable.
* Young children are unsophisticated in generalizing from one situation to another and are novices in testing behaviors.
* Young children may not be able to demonstrate what they know and can do clearly because of difficulties in using pencils or other markers, reading, writing, responding, or certain abstract symbols.
* Separation anxiety, the time of day the test is administered, and rapport with the examiner can all distort results, especially with young children.

Parents have a unique perspective about their child's development and learning history. For this reason, their knowledge about the behavior and attainments of their children is invaluable to teachers. Any full assessment of a child's progress must take the parent's information into account. Moreover, parents have a moral and legal right to be informed about the basis for educational decisions affecting their children.

Moreover, children entering school come from markedly different backgrounds, which have reinforced some behaviors more than others. Assessment procedures must not be used to penalize children at school entry for responses that have heretofore been appropriate for them or which they have not yet had a chance to develop. No screening or assessment can substitute for an observant, competent, caring teacher and a responsive curriculum.

(Hills, 1987b; Meisels, 1987; NAEYC, 1987; NAEYC, 1986; Shepard and Smith, 1985; Shepard and Smith, 1986)

Discussion of Principle 6

- **ALL CHILDREN ARE WELCOMED — AS THEY ARE — INTO HETEROGENEOUS KINDERGARTEN SETTINGS . . .**

  . . . THEY ARE NOT SEGREGATED INTO EXTRA-YEAR PROGRAMS PRIOR TO OR FOLLOWING REGULAR KINDERGARTEN.

The responsibility of the school is to accept children with the aptitudes and skills they bring. The function of the schools is to help the child in all areas. The expectation is not that all children enter with prerequisite skills.

The dramatic growth of extra-year programs represents an attempt by the educational system to cope with an escalating kindergarten curriculum and the varied backgrounds of entering children. However, these programs often increase the risk for failure for children who come to school with the educational odds against them. Selection and placement in "transitional," "developmental," or "readiness" classes often brand the children as failures in their own eyes and those of parents, peers, and teachers.

Children placed in segregated programs often encounter lowered expectations from parents and teachers, have fewer positive peer role models for success and confidence, and lack access to regular curriculum. For all of these reasons, their future progress tends to be more limited and many of them continue in the slow track throughout their schooling.

Heterogeneous class groupings are more likely to encourage growth for lower-functioning children than are homogeneous ones. Experiences within the regular classroom should be organized so that differences among children are valued rather than being viewed as a barrier to effective instruction. Flexible peer groupings, multi-age and ungraded structures, and cooperative learning are some alternatives that can foster learning and self-esteem by valuing the gifts and talents of all children.

(Bredekamp, 1987; Goodlad and Anderson, 1987; Gredler, 1984; Slavin, 1986)

A Call for Action

The primary consideration should be what is best for young children, not institutions or professionals. The case has been made that children do not benefit from the traditional form of retention or its new guise as delayed entry or extra-year classes. Children are placed in double jeopardy when they are denied, on highly questionable premises, the same educational opportunities as their peers.

The belief in the pure maturational viewpoint underlies many of the deleterious practices described in this paper. The emotion that children unfold on an immutable timetable, however appealing, cannot be overgeneralized to intellectual, social, linguistic, and emotional development. A responsive, success-oriented kindergarten curriculum and teacher are bound to have a powerful effect on young children's learning. Children come to school as competent, naturally motivated learners. One of the school's critical responsibilities is to ensure that these characteristics are maintained and strengthened, not destroyed.

The issues are not whether to keep children with age-mates. (Heterogeneous multi-age grouping can stimulate children's development.) It is whether we can continue to uphold practices and program predicated on failure. Failure by any name does not foster success.

What adjustments do schools need in order to make education more responsive to the needs of young children? Reducing class size, making the curriculum less abstract and therefore more related to children's conceptual development, and insisting that only the most appropriately trained, competent, and child-oriented teachers are placed in kindergarten programs are among better means to achieving the educational goal of success for all students.

Limited federal, state, and local resources are being used inappropriately as a result of well-intentioned but misdirected policies. However, simply to stop retention and extra-year classes will not assure success for all children. NAECS/SDE recommends that attention and resources be diverted from ineffective policies and directed toward seeking long-term lasting cures for the ills of the kindergarten/primary curriculum.

A consensus is needed among the educational community and families that only those practices beneficial to young children will be permitted. We can have equitable, excellent, and economical public education for all of the nation's kindergarten children.

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